

“Just like adults, teens have stressors in everyday life. We often forget that a teenager’s life is stressful. We need to help them develop good, healthy coping strategies.”

- Theresa Fawvor, associate vice president of behavioral health services for Memorial Hermann

Depression affects approximately 2.2 million adolescents, ages 12 through 17, and the number continues to climb

# TEEN DEPRESSION

## Katy experts discuss the growing frequency of teens diagnosed with depression and how to recognize, respond, and treat it

Written by Elizabeth Padgett

**L**aura Marshall\*, 16, was a straight-A student and drill team officer at a Katy area high school when her friend died suddenly of a hidden heart disorder. The loss sent Marshall into a tailspin of despair. The once bubbly teen lost interest in activities and began isolating herself - alone in her grief. Marshall says that nothing seemed fun anymore, and soon her grades dropped to almost failing. "I was sitting in math class one day, and out of the blue decided that I didn't care about anything," she says. Later that afternoon, Marshall attempted suicide by taking pills she found in the medicine cabinet. Fortunately, she survived the incident, and her family sought help. She was treated for clinical depression and is now in her mid-twenties and a stable, healthy wife and mother of two. "I'm so happy I got a second chance to make this life the best it can be."

### Not Just a Mood Swing

About 11% of adolescents have a depressive disorder by age 18 according to the National Comorbidity Survey-Adolescent Supplement. While normal behavior can seem similar to that of a toddler including mood swings, outbursts, and defiance, a teenager will most likely still partake in activities that they enjoy. If you notice your teen choosing to be solitary and withdrawing from friends, it may be an early sign they're heading into a depression. Dr. Caroline B. Carter of Houston Methodist West Hospital says, "A teen who is depressed can show anger, quit activities, shun friends and family, and spend more and more time alone or isolated."

### Recognize the Red Flags

Negative effects go far beyond just an irritable mood and can morph into rebellious and unhealthy behaviors. Their struggle to express themselves plays out in various ways including problems at school, running away, drug and alcohol abuse, violence, and low self-esteem.

Problems at school may not just be behavioral. Phaetra Raney-Semien LCSW of Cinco Ranch Behavioral Health says, "Depression can cause low energy and concentration difficulties. At school, this may lead to poor attendance, a drop in grades, or frustration with schoolwork in a formerly good student."

While teens may go online to help escape problems, excessive computer use actually increases their isolation

and can lead to making them further depressed. Internet addiction is another red flag to look out for when interacting with a potentially depressed teen.

### Causes of Adolescent Depression

Theresa Fawvor, associate vice president of behavioral health services for Memorial Hermann says, "The genetic component of depression should not be overlooked. Any information about family history of depression is important."

Dr. Raney-Semien notes, "Research on the heredity of depression within families shows that some individuals are more likely to develop the illness than others. If you have a parent or sibling who has had major depression, you may be one-and-a-half to three times more likely to develop the condition than those who do not have a close relative with the condition."

### Short-Term and Long-Term Effects

If short-term effects are left untreated, they can develop into much more serious problems. Diminished self-esteem and increased isolation can grow into a teen completely removing themselves from life. Dr. Carter says, "The short-term depression can lead to weight gain, strained relationships, worsening health, and decreased performance at work or school. Long-term effects of depression can include substance abuse, loss of a job, and possible self-harm or suicide."

*\*not her real name*

Fawvor adds, "Just like adults, teens have stressors in everyday life. We often forget that a teenager's life is stressful. We need to help them develop good, healthy coping strategies. If they don't, the stressors can develop and overwhelm them to the point that they do develop a depressive disorder."

### How to Help

There are several different types of treatments available and not all of them involve medication. The treatment will depend on the severity of the depression. Although medications help relieve the symptoms, exercise and therapy can be just as effective.

The first step in helping someone is by reaching out to them. Fawvor says, "Don't keep it in the shadows. Address it directly." Treat a teen with depression as you would any loved one. Let them know of your concern and what changes you've noticed in their behavior. She adds, "Even though the moodiness of a teenager may lead a loved one to think, 'They don't want to talk to me. They don't want me involved.' In reality, they do. Everyone needs support. In our families and in our communities, we need to practice more connectedness." **KM**

*ELIZABETH PADGETT suffered clinical depression as a teenager and found a strong support system helped tremendously during her recovery.*

## SIGNS OF DEPRESSION

- **Loss of interest in activities**
- **Reckless behavior**
- **Substance abuse**
- **Withdrawing, isolating, or apathy**
- **Increased irritability**
- **Appetite and/or weight changes**
- **Changes in sleep patterns**
- **Decreased energy**

If your teen has any of these symptoms, contact a therapist that specializes in adolescent depression.

## SUICIDE TALK

If your teen mentions suicide, this is a definite cry for help. Talk to them and find out what's wrong, then seek help from a trained professional immediately.



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